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Environment Department Approves Plan to Investigate Water Contamination at Helena Chemical in Mesquite; Air Monitor to be Installed

(Santa Fe, NM) – The New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) has conditionally approved Helena Chemical Company's Stage 1 Abatement Plan proposal to investigate ground water contamination at a fertilizer plant in Mesquite, New Mexico.

In December 2004, NMED required Helena to install three monitoring wells at this site. Testing results from these wells have shown nitrate, total dissolved solids (TDS), fluoride, and sulfate concentrations in ground water at this site in excess of state ground water standards. Specifically, nitrate has been tested at nearly four times the state standard, fluoride at three times state health-based level, and TDS has been found at twice the standard.

This pollution is currently confined to a shallow aquifer and does not appear to impact the deeper aquifer Mesquite residents use for drinking water.

The Stage 1 Abatement Plan includes an investigation to determine the magnitude and extent of the ground water and soil contamination by installing six additional monitoring wells, drilling soil borings, sampling the soil and ground water, and sampling surface water in a nearby drainage ditch. NMED has approved Helena's plan with several conditions including monitoring well completion requirements and tighter submission deadlines for required reports.

New Mexico water quality regulations require responsible parties to remediate ground water pollution. After the Stage 1 plan has been completed, a Stage 2 clean up proposal will be submitted to NMED. The public will have an opportunity to comment on the Stage 2 plan and request a hearing. Public comment will be sought by NMED within 30 days of the cleanup plan being received by NMED.

In addition to ground water concerns, NMED is also pursuing air permitting issues at the Helena facility. NMED is awaiting additional modeling information from Helena before it can deem Helena's air permit application complete. Helena continues to be assessed fines for each day it operates without an air quality permit.

In order to give members of the public more information on local air pollution, NMED's Air Quality Bureau will install a continuous air monitor at the Mesquite Elementary School or another nearby location in the next few weeks. The information provided by this monitor will be readily accessible to all local community members.

"I hope that these actions show that NMED is taking the community's concerns seriously and responding in the most expedient and responsible way possible," said NMED Deputy Secretary Derrith Watchman-Moore. "Helena has been cooperating with these efforts and we hope to have these issues resolved as soon as possible."

Environmental concerns at the Helena plant were first brought to NMED's attention by complaints from the public as well as by Senator Cynthia Nava, Representative Joseph Cervantes and County Commissioner Oscar Butler.

Helena Chemical is based in Collierville, Tennessee and has owned the facility in Mesquite since 1989. The facility is used as a retail agricultural chemical distribution center for local farmers.

For additional information, please contact Jon Goldstein, NMED Communications Director at (505) 827-0314.

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